

North-Atlantic Left Dialogue, November 9, 2008, Berlin:

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1. What are the chief strengths and weaknesses of the European and North-American lefts & major opportunities for strengthening the lefts?

This is actually two questions (!) both posed in relation to present crises & circumstances. The first issue is thus how do global *relations of force* (economic, political and military) present dangers to the Lefts, as well as opportunities? A key strength of some Left forces is that they are not tainted – as are G8 political leaders – with the failures of disciplinary neo-liberalism. A second strength is evidence of a growth in left power potentials and networking that could combine into the form of a new *post-modern Prince*.

By contrast the left needs to overcome the weaknesses that stem from how disciplinary neo-liberalism has been institutionalized over the past 30 years or so. This has meant: subordination of state forms (and culture) to capital, restructuring of state obligations for social reproduction (rolling back welfare, provisions connected to the family, education and healthcare), intensified exploitation of human beings and nature, extreme inequality of income, wealth and life chances. There is also acceleration in dispossession of producers of means to subsistence – e.g. privatization of water, common lands and natural resources. The Pentagon stands as the ultimate and coercive custodian of global neo-liberalism, with its global military strategy of “full spectrum dominance”.

Let us take the *economic* relations of force first. Parallels are now being made with the Great Depression of the 1930s. However, capitalism in the North Atlantic regions is now quite different to that in the early 1930s, not simply because of Keynesian macroeconomics but also because of collective institutions of capitalist co-operation such as the G8, as well as the EU, NATO, etc. The dislocations associated with contemporary capitalist development may not necessarily have the same material and political implications as in the 1930s (e.g. financial crisis leading to mass unemployment leading to the abandonment of

liberal capitalism).¹ In 1929 the service sector in western Europe and North America comprised approximately one-third of all workers, whereas today about two-thirds of all workers are in services, and half of service workers are within the public sector. In 1929 transfer incomes in Western Europe amounted to less than 4 percent of GNP, whereas in 1987, because of unemployment benefits, pensions, family and social security allowances, transfer payments amounted to 30 percent of GNP, thus stabilizing capitalist development. What can the Lefts do to attract greater support from service workers?

Indeed, with respect to the *political* level of analysis, in much of the world, liberal constitutional forms have been consolidated, and become relatively universal in the politics of the European Union and Former East Bloc. It is in this political context that European leaders have institutionalized disciplinary neo-liberalism and new constitutionalism (e.g. the Maastricht Agreements) thus separating economic policy and management from democratic political control and institutionalizing capitalist disciplines. However, after years of preaching sound money and fiscal prudence and cuts in social benefits we suddenly see G7 guarantees to support the financial markets to the tune of 5 trillion dollars or more. The left needs to reiterate that it was widely anticipated by many that financial liberalization and deregulation were paths to disaster and that G8 political leaders ignored these challenges – e.g. most recently the Trilateral Commission

¹ In the US the poor (and many of the unemployed) have arguably been rendered increasingly invisible in America’s affluent society and politics and the prison boom that began in the 1980s has made a new contribution to the invisibility of the poor, removing them from poor communities and official government statistics. Adding the prison population to official unemployment statistics reveals that the jobless rate for young white men in 2000 was 10.6% without and 12% with the prison population counted, for young Hispanic men it was 10.3% without and 14.3% with the prison population, and for young black men it was 23.7 versus 32.4%. Also, 1 in 3 young black men out of work in 2000 was in prison or jail. See Western, Bruce. *Punishment and Inequality in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.

discussed these problems in early 2008 but the authorities did nothing to avert the financial collapse until it was too late. Moreover, the left should point out that measures as just undertaken by the G8 only occur when the capitalist market system is itself is threatened, not to deal with human or environmental security. G8 leaders – who govern on behalf of the rich – do not seem to be capable of sensing the contemporary crisis of social reproduction that is occurring, e.g. reflected in the US by waves of foreclosures and dispossession, rising unemployment, and growing inequality (e.g. Republicans under Bush and putatively McCain, who owns 12 cars and 9 houses; Palin’s wardrobe; Bush’s Treasury Secretary has a net worth of \$500 million).

The crisis of global leadership and questioning of the legitimacy of the capitalist market system opens up very large opportunities for the Left. It has a new strength: the internet and other new means of communication have broken the monopoly of the ruling classes to present their official versions of the truth. The global Lefts might also use a new slogan, maybe something along the lines of the Argentinean left’s response to the failure of its leaders “*¡Que se vayan todos!*”, “Everyone must go”: i.e. the corrupt and inept G8 politicians who are beholden to plutocratic interests – as markets crash and the rest of us bear the consequences – e.g. weaker countries are forced to adopt austerity measures (e.g. Iceland, Hungary, Turkey) under IMF tutelage. The G8 leaders presided over the current disasters and they cannot now claim the right to fix the system!

With respect to the *strategic* or *military* relations of force, the central feature of the last two decades is how the power and influence of the United States has increased, and its empire of bases now encircles the globe, partly to sustain US control over much of the world’s oil supplies (and to underpin its energy-intensive consumerist growth model). Here we understand the USA as a state-civil society complex, as a locus and model of accumulation and as a crystallization of military power and power projection capabilities. This is despite the efforts of other nations, for example China and Russia, to counterbalance some of this strategic power. One indicator of this relates to the redefinition and extension of NATO out of area – in the

Balkans and in Afghanistan for example. The Lefts have little influence over military-strategic questions and this needs to change and be addressed in Left programs. A further weakness for the European Lefts is that the penetration of not only European economic and political development but also European security apparatuses by American power means that progressive initiatives within a wider process of European integration may be limited by the USA’s relationship with each member state—the arrangements in question remain shrouded in secrecy and connected to the security and intelligence apparatuses – an aspect of the strategic relations of force. Indeed the left has been subjected to intense surveillance and intimidation especially since emergency powers were instituted after 9/11.

A final weakness of some of the old Left is related to its theorization of some of the changes just sketched, and its conceptualization of political agency. We need better theoretical frameworks to grasp the profound attack on the conditions of existence of a majority of the world’s population. This means looking beyond the crisis of accumulation dramatized when capitalist financial markets imploded in late 2008; more fundamentally I think we should see this as a crisis of global social reproduction – involving all of the above as well as the reckless despoliation of the biosphere, intensification of exploitation of human beings, and the spread of primitive accumulation in North and South (e.g. privatization and dispossession of livelihoods). One way to approach this is to conceptualize questions as involving not only power and production but also what feminists call social reproduction to identify key dimensions – as well as prevailing norms and governing principles – of the global political economy.²

Another way to put this is the Lefts need to promote a new “common sense” and challenge the hegemonic capitalist concepts – e.g. that the *credible* governments seek to generate the *confidence* of capital and ensure a favourable investment climate for the “markets”. We should

² Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill (2003) *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy*. Palgrave.

redefine credibility terms of sustainable, equitable and just policies to meet social needs. Lefts will need to engage with how such concepts and questions play out in the crises, showing that stabilization of capitalism is not enough – a deeper argument should be that capitalist states, which have helped to construct and legitimate the enormous claims on society associated with the bailouts of capital – need to be transformed. The commanding heights of the economy need to be brought under democratic control with a different type of governance by red-green parties of a new kind, collectively a post-modern Prince whose central task is to govern and foster a new common sense (see below)

2. How do we deal with the contradictions between the socialist left, centrist social democracy and the civil-society movements?

This question is another way of saying that there is an absence of a coherent and well-organized Left International, and we need to build one. There are many radical forces not just in the northern Metropolitan countries, but also in the South who share a broadly sympathetic political perspective that might be brought together in a coherent program – e.g. via the World Social Forum, and the various national and regional social – as well as some of the political parties, movements and institutions – e.g. ATTAC and the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil, as well as many professionals and technical experts – that can provide a template, and a series of methods of networking, reflecting key forces in a post-modern Prince

Given the scale and depth of the present global crises, the Lefts seem to have little alternative but to engage in a strategy of co-operating to transform the states and to engage those in the social movements who are willing to consider how to democratize capital and to re-channel its direction. With this opening in mind I would suggest the following methodological points to consider “realistic prospects” of such a combination:

A. Acknowledge that many of today’s progressive movements are grounded in a very broad grasp of conditions of existence in ways that go well beyond earlier forms of progressivism when primacy was given to the politics of production and struggles between labour and capital. This meant that many other fundamental issues – associated with livelihood,

racism, relations between men and women, with social reproduction and relations between human beings and nature – were relegated to secondary importance.

B. We should avoid the fallacy of assuming that all forces of opposition are/should be unified in a specific response to all problems, or unified as a traditional political party.

C. Whilst this can give rise to a lack of organization it is difficult to co-opt, intimidate or decapitate movements that are globally interlinked and organized through powerful means and modes of global communication; they use radical media to place dominant power under scrutiny; critiques can be instantaneously communicated worldwide.

D. We might therefore re-imagine political agency in terms of forces in movement – a *post-modern Prince* whose key elements are characterized by unity in diversity.

Nevertheless one obstacle that needs to be confronted directly is the reticence of many left forces to strive for control over state institutions as a part of a radical program to address the current crisis. Without control of the state, capital can never be fully controlled, nor can the education system be reformed, and indeed without the state we cannot imagine for example, the production of a global public health system that operates for the vast majority and does not simply cater to diseases of affluence. An objection to this sometimes heard in Canada is that the state is capitalist (and capital is the state). However this does not negate the position that we need new forms of state and that the state is a necessary mechanism of transformation of society: to advance a strategy of social transformation the state itself must be transformed. This is an argument which the neo-liberals should have taught the left by now – their efforts have been precisely to try to change the very mechanisms and operations of the state, and the patterns of incentives the state embodies in its policies, to institutionalize their power and create a new hegemony.

Being based in North America there is a prior question: what parties or vehicles actually exist for a socialist program, in nations where there has never been anything like a developed welfare state or strong socialist parties? There is also the added question that – as Gramsci

pointed out – there are many on the left who, despite their potent critiques of the capitalist system, nevertheless are fearful of ultimately challenging it, i.e. they either have an inner fear of taking power or the present situation is perhaps still congenial to them. This stance has undoubted psychoanalytic dimensions (that I do not claim to fully understand) but it results in the emasculation of the left; as Gramsci observed in the *Prison Notebooks*: “The beaver, pursued by trappers who want his testicles from which medicinal drugs can be extracted, to save his life tears off his own testicles”

3. What are the key new programmatic components of a left strategy that might enable a revived left to avoid the previous decline of the traditional left?

Left programs should seek broad support and focus on immediate macroeconomic measures to stabilize and remobilize the global political economy with specific proposals for governing the commanding heights of the economy (when capital is mobile and potentially global) and new mechanisms of international co-operation.

We are witnessing how capital is demanding that the state socializes its huge debts, and nationalize bankrupt firms. The position that Lefts should take on this question, is in my view very simple and clear. We should demand full nationalization of the commanding heights, with democratic control over production, and of institutions of social reproduction, including the education system, e.g. to ensure that the curricula offered (e.g. in economics departments) include serious consideration of alternative and sustainable ways of organizing social and economic life, not an economics curriculum of problem-solving mechanisms to reproduce the capitalist system and maximize profits. A possible objection to nationalization is that capital is no longer national, but is increasingly part of a globalized political economy, and therefore the issue of who owns capital operating in different jurisdictions it is a difficult and thorny one. However, the EU has already provided us with the template of a solution, when it created not only the euro but also the European Central Bank (similar arguments can be made with respect to prudential regulation of capital – e.g. work done by private capital itself in the private G30). The ECB has transnational authority in the execution

of European monetary policy and aspects of regulation, in ways significant for all countries that use the euro for their transactions or hold it as a reserve currency. Nationalization would face specific and complex constitutional challenges in North America, due to NAFTA & the US constitution. Nonetheless, it is possible to imagine how to fully socialize capital.

It may be objected further that Lefts have little expertise in constructing such institutions, but it should be pointed out that the best brains that money can buy, and their institutions, built up over centuries by capital, are utterly discredited by the recent crisis. Moreover the Lefts can go beyond the narrow, selfish, myopic & economic limits of dominant discourse and address the logic of our energy-intensive lifestyles and patterns of consumption and their global implications – e.g. for health, the biosphere and military strategy. Initiatives should link to other long-term policies, e.g. to deal with structural unemployment and ageing populations. The latter trend will go much further in the next 30-40 years, according to virtually all demographic predictions. So far fiscal crisis has been primarily related to the mobility of capital and skills; the age structure of the population will increasingly dominate fiscal and social questions. The new common sense of the Lefts should be creative – to break down false dichotomies concerning work & retirement, productive & unproductive people, and the young and the old.

4. How exactly can and should the left in each region help the left in the other regions? Where does it go from here? What is its potential? Left co-operation should be imaginative, democratic & unlimited:

1. Resources should be synergized & allow joint research and shared political initiatives, e.g. to rethink governance of global finance, & issues above. Similar task forces could address cultural issues, media, military and strategic questions.

2. Future meetings should combine serious studies with debates and networking. Potentials could be increased by linking with World Social Forum and other left organizations. A lot can be learned from how *de facto* Capitalist Internationals operate, e.g. Trilateral Commission (although these are exclusive and self-selecting).